

The Trouble on the Torolito.

BY FRANCIS LYNDE.

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The Irishman caught the blow on his arm and parried it with the skill of a practiced swordsman. Before I realized what was toward, the extroper's pistol was out and leveled, not at Wykamp, but at the Mexican. "Ye would, would ye?—ye black-jowled haythin! Down wid that gun!"

A heavy revolver dropped in the dust on the opposite side of the Mexican's horse.

"Now, thin, Mr. Halcott, dear; your watch, at ye place—now, thin, ye murtherin' Paythans, it's wan full minute's start av the 45 I'll give the pair av yez. Vamoose!"

Notwithstanding his apparent unbalancing on the passionate side, Wykamp was no coward. Unarmed as he was, I think he would have tried to ride the Irishman down; but the Mexican set the direct example and the bay took it as a challenge for a race. As long as they were distinguishable, I could see Wykamp struggling with the big horse; and being a man of peace, I was glad when Connolly laughed and dropped his weapon into its holster.

"Score wan for the X-hans!" he said. "If the cap'n would, but shut wan eye an' luk away wid' t'other, in free days there wouldn't be a shrike in the Torolito or a man to drive it." He picked up the Mexican's revolver and passed it to me, butt foremost. "The arramint av Sargent Connolly. Hold it at arm's length whin yez toy wid it; thin forrun tools shplit betune the cylinder an' the barr' whin they go off. Now, thin, sorry, if ye've the lether I'm at your service."

I explained, as well as I could without going into details, that the engineer's visit had canceled the trip to the fort; and Connolly rode off to report to his employer. Macpherson came in at noon, and we held a council of war over the cold snack served in the bunk-room by Andrew the Mid.

"Honors are easy, so far," said Macpherson, when we had discussed the stake-pulling incident. "While Wykamp was here filing his allegation against Kilgore, I was at his camp, notifying his foreman that an injunction would follow any encroachment on my placer claim."

"It's a declaration of war on both sides. You're in for it now."

"Yes, and I'll fight it out to the bitter end. I didn't mean to, at first. I had some talk with Lovatt and the others, and they proposed to buy me out at a fair figure and do the square thing all around. That was before they got hold of Selter's water-right, of course. Now they send a fellow in here who is evidently spoiling for a fight; who shoots at my men and kills my stock. They propose to ignore me—to freeze me out of the game without giving me a show for my investment. They may do it in the end, but I'll give them a run for their money."

I laughed. "Let's be frank with each other, Angus. It goes a good bit deeper with you than any struggle to hold the Torolito. You will have to admit that if Wykamp hadn't—"

"But he has," broke in Macpherson, with rising wrath. "He might have had the Torolito and welcome if he had left me that which is worth more to me than all the stock ranges that lie out of doors. But he wouldn't, and now he's got to take the consequences. She won't let me obliterate him, but I'll break him world without end before I'm through with him."

There was a vindictive emphasis in the threat which started the millstones of reflection. Cold circumstances, and a sharp turn of the purely personal thumb-screws, transform a frank fighter into a vengeful enemy? Macpherson had always been a hearty combatant, but his antagonism was of the kind which seeks an early hand-shaking after the fact.

"Break him in a business way, you mean? How can you do that?"

His smile was insinuating. "There's more in my placer claim than appears on the surface. Do you know where it is?"

"It's anywhere you see fit to locate it—on the line of the ditch, I suppose."

"That's where you're wrong. I didn't invent it. It is an actual gold-bearing bar, and it lies at the mouth of the upper canyon just above the site of the Glenlivet company's proposed dam."

"So Wykamp will have to go above or below it, is that it?"

"Yes; without the choice. He'll have to go above. The lay of the land is such that he can't build below the gap in the hog-back; and if he builds on the site selected by the man who made the preliminary survey last summer, my claim will be at the bottom of his reservoir."

"I see. But he can go above, can't he?"

"It's possible, but it will be expensive. He will have to tunnel a small mountain to get his outlet from the head-gates. And that isn't the worst of it."

"What is the worst of it?"

Macpherson pushed his stool from the table and began to fill his pipe. He was provokingly deliberate, and when the tobacco was fairly alight his explanation was of the vaguest.

"If he hasn't already done so, he'll go farther up the canyon and find his site ready-made and waiting for him. I only hope he'll take it."

CHAPTER VI.

FACILIS DECENSUS AVERNI.

Macpherson left me to my own devices after the snack-luncheon and went his way hillward to look for strays in the northern gulches.

"If you feel like riding a few lines after awhile, have Andy saddle 'Clubfoot' for you. He's forgotten how to 'buck,' and if you can keep him from breaking his leg in a dog-hole he'll bring you back all right," he said, at parting; adding, as a stirrup-word: "But I shouldn't ride too far, if I were you. You're going by kangaroo-jumps now, and you mustn't get a set-back."

So much for a well-meaning advice to an ill one who, having ridden more than was meet the previous day, was minded to stay at home and let the saddle-bruises heal. But in mid-afternoon one of the microscopic incidents which change the courses of rivers, decide the fate of nations, and reverse the plans of mice and men, came between, and the horse with the epithelial name had his amble asid.

The incident was the inability of Andrew the Desperate to maintain his fair share of any conversation. By two o'clock he was answering in monosyllables; by three a direct question elicited no more than a nod or a head-shake; at half-past he was quite dumb—a mute and inglorious camp-cook, fit company for neither gods nor men. At four loquacity surrendered at discretion, the animal with the opprobrious name was put in requisition, and I rode away to be with a silence of Nature's making.

Behold, now, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! If the well-intentioned desperado had possessed a few more phrases to be rehearsed at need, there would have been for his would-be gossip no meditative amble up the valley in the cool of the day; no attack of unreasoning and altogether uncalculated curiosity; no meteoric descent into the Torolito; and no—but let us not anticipate.

Barring the saddle-bruise reminders, and the prickings of the thorn in the flesh of illness—which use and time will finally dull for the least heroic sufferer—the ride up the valley was a pure delight. The afternoon was perfect. The atmosphere was like a draught of fine old wine; the tumbling thunder of the river was sweet music to any traffic-bruised ear of the cities; and the color-scheme of the mighty mountains on either hand was full of soft grays and soothing browns. The completeness of it was soul-satisfying, and it was easy to understand how, upon such a day and with such encompassments, a well man might rejoice in the mere fact of life. Also, it was less difficult to comprehend the reluctance of one Angus the First to abdicate and go into exile at the decree of any syndicate of them all. It was a hopeless lapse into medievalism, one would say, but at the moment I could cheerfully have seen the phos of the land company, with all the prospective benefits to the many which they contemplated, come to naught to the end that this sequestered corner of great nature's domain should not be marred by disfiguring plowshares.

This thought and its entail rang the reflective changes while time the bronco was topping the swell from which the settlement at Valley Head came into view. Curiously enough, the clustered farmsteads and tiled fields of the small colony were far from suggesting that they were the precursors of the tidal wave of agriculture and banality which would presently sweep down the placid

valley in the wake of the great irrigation canal. The line between wild-flowers and weeds is not sharply drawn. The bull-thistle is a thing of beauty as a single plant, and it is only when it becomes a ruthless invader that we wage war upon it and strive to stamp it out. Macpherson's cattle on the rolling swells, and this small seasoning of humanity at the meeting-point of the mountains, were the artistic accent in great nature's picture. But they sufficed.

At the summit of the swell commanding a view of the mountain-guarded strath of the settlers, I was minded to turn back; but the club-footed one snuffed the cool breeze pouring down from the upper canyon and asked, horsewise, with gentle toggings and champings, for a free rein. It was given, and we drifted on, past the deserted school-house, across the freshly turned furrows of the land company's canal, and in dog course of leisurely equine stambulings, beyond the last farmhouse and so on up to the dam at the canyon gateway.

Here was the battle-field upon

which Macpherson had elected to fight for his kingdom. It was well-chosen. Unlike the Six-Mile, whose walls were perpendicular cliffs, the upper canyon was a tortuous gulch with precipitous slopes rising sharply from the water's edge. Below the settlers' dam the wedge-like rift widened and narrowed again, leaving a natural basin between mountain and "hog-back" which would serve admirably as a reservoir for the great irrigation ditch. In this basin the stream had deposited a bar of silt and glistening mica-schist and white quartz pebbles, the age-old washings of its swift rush down the canyon; and this was doubtless the placer-ground upon which Macpherson had filed a claim as discoverer. His outline of the status quo became clearly intelligible. A dam at the final narrowing of the gulch would submerge the bar; and above the basin it would have to be carried to an enormous height in the V-shaped chasm to retain a sufficiently large body of water. I remembered the stereotyped reply of the Mexican vaqueros to the "Gringo" pioneers and the Santa Fe trail-ers: "Carraja! poco mesa rid!" and wondered how much farther up the river the engineer of the Glenlivet company would have to go to find Macpherson's "ready-made" site for the dam.

It was at this point in the meditative excursion that the fire of curiosity was lighted, and Macpherson's air of mystery added its painful of fagots. There was no good reason why a sick man who was at best but a transient onlooker should trouble himself about the matter, but curiosity knows no age, sex, or previous conditions of attitude to maladies, incurable or otherwise. Wherefore the onlooker must needs slide tremulously from the saddle, tether the club-footed beast to a stunted tree growing from a cleft in a near-by bowlder, and make toilful way up the canyon.

Wykamp's alternative came into view beyond the second elbow in the wedge-shaped gorge. It was another scooped-out basin, similar to the one below; and a blazed fir-tree with blue-pencil markings proved that the engineer had already made his preliminary reconnaissance. But the insurmountable obstacle to which Macpherson's mysterious hint pointed was altogether unimportant. Aside from the added expense of tunneling a spur of the mountain for an outlet, the upper basin seemed quite a promising place, since less masonry would be required. Was there anything in the topography of the canyon to forbid the construction of the dam at this point? To be sure, the steep slopes were inclined planes of crumbling shale; but the native granite could not be far to seek in excavating. And with the everlasting mountains for his dam-anchors, the engineer might surely possess his soul in security.

The sharp-pitched acclivity was slippery with an ooze of broken shale and dry pine-needles. I climbed a little higher to a shallow niche where a projecting rock promised a foothold, and sat down to try to puzzle it out and to gather breath for the return. The thin-lipped breeze, with the kiss of the snow-caps lingering in its breath, swept softly down from the bald summit of Jim's mountain; and the minimized thunder of the stream became the sub-bass in a great organ symphony in which the whispering firs played the sibilant treble. From the wider world below, the voice of a woman rose clear and strong in a prolonged double syllable—some farmer's wife or daughter calling her cow—and the familiar cry was a reminder that the day was done. If one would not have a soft-hearted giant and his following out scouring the valley for a stray invalid, one must scramble back and mount and ride.

The deed, or at least the beginning of it, fitted itself to the thought. But in the act of rising, the crumbling foothold gave way, and I shot down the slippery mountain-side into the stream. For a single jubilant instant joy was uppermost. One may well have a shuddering horror of winning out of life by the consumptive's road, and welcome as a messenger of God's mercy an end swift and measurably painless. But the instinct of self-preservation does not take into account a possible lack of things worth living for. The plunge into the icy waters of the Torolito was sharply reactionary, and with the gasping baptism the battle for life was on.

Measured by agonizings it lasted long. The water was no more than waist-deep, but the might of a strong man would have availed little against the swift down-rush of the torrent in its bowlder-studded bed. Twice and yet once again, I made frenzied shift to struggle to foot or knee in the boiling raceway; and at the final emergence had a vanishing glimpse of the embankment of the Selter dam with some one standing thereon. It was a woman, and her figure was outlined against the wedge of blue sky beyond the canyon gateway. So much I saw in the catching of a breath, but when I would have cried to her the torrent uprose in its might and effaced me.

CHAPTER VII.

"BACK TO THE EARTH AGAIN."

If the immortal soul of man be a conscious entity, as some assert, what becomes of it in those lapses of the realities when the wheels of

the mental recording machinery stop, and some buffet or bruise of the body corporal tears a leaf out of the book of time? For a certain curious onlooker, whose queryings sent him to plunge unwillingly into the icy waters of the Torolito, Angus, time's clock stopped with a glimpse of the dam, an outlined figure of a woman, and a mighty dining of the flood in his ears. When it began to tick again, it was night, and the point of view was the pillow of a bed in a strange room. A lamp was burning on a small table at the head of the bed, and the room appeared as a half-story chamber in a substantial log house, with the rough rafters pitching low over the bed.

A murmur of voices came from below, and an intermittent clatter of knives and forks on ironstone china. Presently a chair complained in the room beneath, and a slow step mounted the stairs. I closed my eyes wearily to open them when the leisurely steps reached the bedside.

The man who stood over me was tall, lean, leathern-skinned; and with no more beard than an Indian. If he had not worn his hat at the supper-table below, he had put it on to come upstairs. He was in his shirt-sleeves, and his manner was of those to whom coats are becoming luxuries.

"Maady, she thort she hearn ye stirrin'," he said, and his speech associated itself with my recollection of the leisurely step on the stair. "Dane four' yowere's ag'in, at last, have ye? Feel like ye could eat a little somethin'?"

I wagged my head on the pillow, and asked the stereotyped question of the lately resuscitated: "Where am I?"

"Ye're here," he replied, with a simple directness which left nothing to be desired. "Nan, she fished ye out 'n the creek, an' we evar'd ye up to the house, 'mongst us, an' ye've been here ever since."

"Nan?" I queried.

"Oomhoo; she's my daughter. She was 'snoeyin' the cow, an' she saw



IT WAS A WOMAN.

you floppin' round in the run-away 'bove the dam. What-all was ye tryin' to do, anyhow?"

"Trying to get out, if I remember correctly. What is this for?" I put my hand to the bandage on my head. "Hit's a purty tolerable bad cut; bumped it ag'in a rock, I reckon. Hurts some, don't it?"

"Not much; but I'm as weak as a child. You say your name is Selter?"

"New; I didn't say so, but hit air. An' ye're the tenderfoot from Macpherson's. I've hearn the name, but I misremember hit."

"Halcott," I said; and this was my informal introduction to the Selter household.

"Reckon ye couldn't eat anything," he said, hospitably, after an uneasy pause.

"No, I think not."

He left me at that, shuffling as he had come; and a few minutes afterward there was a lighter step on the stair and a tap at the half-open door. I said "Come," thinking it was the daughter. It was Miss Sanborn. She had improvised a tray out of a tin kettle-cover, and was bringing me a slice of toast and a cup of tea. Hunger was not in me, but her thoughtful kindness stirred some faint simulacone of it.

"Thank you, Miss Sanborn; that is very good of you. But I don't believe I could eat a mouthful."

"You must," she insisted. "You are getting better now, but you won't gain strength until you begin to eat. We mustn't let you starve yourself."

"There isn't much danger of that, is there?" I queried. "I ate a very hearty dinner, as I remember it."

She made the pillow comfortable and sat down at the bedside to hold the improvised tray. "When was that?" she asked.

"To-day; two or three hours before I started out to ride up the valley."

Her smile was a cordial in itself.

"Nature is kind to us—sometimes. You have suffered dreadfully, and have been very near to death without realizing it. Your hearty dinner was eaten just three weeks ago to-day."

It was blankly incredible, and I said so.

"It is true. It was brain fever, the doctor says. You have been delicious all the time when you haven't been unconscious."

"The doctor, you say? I didn't know there was one in the valley." (To be continued.)

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